The way we go to war

LBJ may have dissimulated more than most, but there are powerful reasons why democratic governments are seldom particularly open with their people on the brink of war

It was in the February of an election year that the President of the United States sent his personal envoy to talk, in what he intended to be great secrecy, to the prime minister of that battered country whose army was being bled white by an apparently unbeatable enemy. The envoy left the prime minister in little doubt about the American commitment : unless the military situation took a clear turn for the better, he said in his report two days later to the President, " it was finally understood that . . . you would intervene." But the President wanted to get himself re-elected, and kept on hoping, as men will hope in these circumstances, that something would happen to make an American intervention unnecessary ; he was not being totally dishonest when he beat the Republicans that November by attacking them as the war party and claiming that his own policy was to keep America out of it. It was only in the following April that he eventually gave the order for the American army to go into action.

That election year was 1916 ; the President was Woodrow Wilson, the special envoy was Colonel House, and the prime minister Colonel House gave his undertaking to was M. Briand of France. The fact that there is a curious similarity between the course that Woodrow Wilson followed in 1916 and 1917, and what Lyndon Johnson did in 1964 and 1965, does not mean that the two situations were identical, or that the two men concealed their minds from the American electorate to the same degree ; there is nothing quite like the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in Wilson's handling of his problem. But the similarity is close enough to make the point.

The point is that the way in which great powers, and especially great democracies, go to war rarely has much to do with the ideal of frank analysis, frankly debated, against which Mr Johnson's performance in 1964 is now being retrospectively measured. The leaders of such countries are seldom open with public opinion, either about the likelihood of war or about the reasons why they think they may have to fight ; they rely on victory to silence the questions people might ask afterwards. When President Roosevelt told the Americans in the 1940 election that " I shall say it again and again and again : your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars," he had already committed the United States to a huge programme of military aid to Britain, and had drawn up the Rainbow contingency plans for a simultaneous war with Germany and Japan, and was soon to slap on Japan the embargoes which some people still believe pushed the Japanese into their attack on Pearl Harbor. No doubt Roosevelt was hoping that war might even then be avoided ; but that was not quite how he put it to the voters. And it is not only the Americans who get into wars this way. It is doubtful whether there has been any democratic leader in this century, except perhaps Chamberlain in 1939, who can claim to have taken his country into a major conflict with its eyes reasonably open.

But of course it is not enough to say that Mr Johnson in 1964 was behaving in more or less the customary way, with maybe 15 per cent more deviousness than the par for the course. The question that matters is why men who lead democracies—even, and indeed especially, men who count themselves as standing on the left of centre —behave like this. That is the issue raised by the *New York Times's* publication of the secret documents about the origins of the Vietnam war, and the *New York Times* will not fully justify its action until it faces this larger issue. No doubt it is asking a great deal of men honourably but desperately obsessed with their own immediate agony to recognise that it is only one example of the general condition. But it is ; we had better recognise that the problem which has burst out of its cage is the relationship between democracy and war.

If the issue can be recognised for what it is, the embarrassment that has been caused to the American government is not earth-shattering. No doubt there are plenty of people in Washington, and elsewhere, who are not going to like the new habits they will have to acquire if the Supreme Court does eventually tell the Administration that it cannot stop the *New York Times* and the rest from printing these documents (see page 54). That could mean, on the worst interpretation for the civil servants, that the only sort of documents marked " secret " that the government will be able to call upon the law actually to keep secret will be those dealing with current military operations. That is not much of a restriction in a society as open as the United States, where most people are irreverent about the dignity of government and it is pretty easy for men in government service to walk out, with photostats in their pockets, to jobs in business or the universities. For the rest, the public servants whose job it is to think about the future will either have to circulate their ideas to fewer people, or put machine-guns around their filing cabinets, or just not commit their thoughts to paper ; and foreign governments will have to get used to the idea that the private remarks they think they are confiding to the Secretary of State may be shared, surprisingly soon afterwards, by a dozen sub-editors on their way to the composing room. This will not make the life of government any easier, but then the main business of newspapers in a free society is not to make life easy for governments. It is to publish as much as the law decides they can get away with.

There is no point in crying over the spilt milk of secrecy. The *New York Times* has done the news-making side of its job by testing the legal limits of the government's

desire to conduct its affairs in private. It will have performed a much larger service if—but only if—its disclosures make people think about the whole subject of how democracies cope with the business of going to war.

It is not a sufficient explanation of why governments tell their people only a fraction of what the governments know, or suspect, to say that it is because people in general are reluctant even to think of war. Of course they are ; except for the minority who like to measure themselves against fear, people hate the idea that they might be killed, or that their sons and husbands might, or even that they will have to spend a portion of their lives doing physically demanding and sometimes dangerous things a long way from home. But the real problem is not with public opinion in general. Most people are willing to acknowledge, even if they would not put it into so many words, that the question of war or peace is different from the other business they entrust to their government. They do not expect the government to deal with it by the procedures they hope it applies to its other business ; they accept that it may not want to confide its calculations to its adversaries, or even to them; they know they are often told less than the whole truth, and sometimes a great deal less. It is not the full flower of the democratic idea, but it is what most people are prepared to live with until they can see what the alternative is. The odds are that there has been much less outrage, or even surprise, about the *New York Times's* revelations on the small streets of America and Europe than there has been among the politicians, or the people who write newspapers and produce television programmes.

And this is probably where the explanation lies. The way in which the democracies appear to sidle up to the question of war—crabwise, eyes averted, hand over mouth —is largely a result of the problem their governments have with one fairly small, but important, section of their population. The name this section of the population gives to itself is the liberal intelligentsia ; it consists of that part of the middle class which, with a reasonably good education behind it, keeps up its interest in public affairs afterwards on the basis of what it calls left-of-centre politics. It is arguably the most influential body of opinion in the western world today. It is civilised, rational and concerned for others. As President Johnson and now President Nixon have discovered, no policy can be sustained for long without its consent. But it has one over-riding characteristic when it applies itself to the problems of international politics. Its emotions understand the misery of war, but it does not possess a matching intellectual grasp of the way cause and effect continuously operate among the powers of the world. Its feelings are international, but its reasoning remains parochial. Because it is so nice itself, it is unwilling to look too closely into the minds of the adversaries its country has to deal with. The result is that it is usually in favour of putting off unpleasant decisions : it prefers not to bring itself to face the possibility of war until it sees the knife at its own throat, or at least its immediate neighbour's.

This is the decent, kindly cross that democratic governments carry around their necks in the contest with the dictatorships. It was people like this who on August 3, 1914, heard Sir Edward Grey spell out the argument for war—the evidence of German ambitions, the commitment to Belgium, the defencelessness of France's northern coast—and could still believe, even then, that Germany was prepared to respect the integrity of Belgium and that the real trouble was Britain's "mad desire" to maintain the balance of power. It was the same body of opinion which delayed rearmament in the 1930s until it was within a few weeks of being too late, and which then made Chamberlain jump through the Munich hoop before it would recognise that Hitler was a problem for Britain too. These are the people who would have protested furiously if Chamberlain had described his war aims in 1939 as 70 per cent the preservation of British influence in the world, 20 per cent the need to keep Hitler inside Germany and 10 per cent the interests of the people of Poland ; though that is about how the British government of the time saw it. They are the sort of people every country needs, but it is not hard to understand why they make governments shuffle and prevaricate—and sometimes lie—on the brink of war.

So Mr Johnson prevaricated, and said one thing while making plans for another, and no one outside his group of intimates knew how likely it was that those plans would have to be put into action. It became fairly obvious quite soon afterwards, to quite a lot of people, that he had been playing a devious game ; but that does not lessen the deviousness, or make it any less a cause for concern that leaders of democracies should so often find it difficult to be honest with public opinion at such moments. In the end, of course, like the others, Mr Johnson will have to stand his judgment on whether the dissimulation he practised can be excused by the reasons which eventually persuaded him to go to war. And that brings the argument back to the question that has been virtually obliterated in the newspapers in the past week. The central issue of the events of 1964 is not Mr Johnson's writhings ; it is whether the United States was right or wrong about what was happening in Vietnam.

The evidence is not all in yet, and will not be for quite a time. But it is worth repeating what seemed to most people to be the case at the time, and still seems to be. This is that the war had been set in motion by a decision taken in North Vietnam, and that North Vietnam was supplying the apparently decisive margin of men and guns ; that the superb military efficiency of the communists had brought the South Vietnamese army to the point of collapse ; that superb military efficiency tells you nothing about the political acceptability of the ideas it is seeking to enforce, as Hitler's army showed clearly enough ; that the defeat of South Vietnam would have been followed by a similar process in Laos and Cambodia, and possibly elsewhere ; and that for ten years already the world, not least the enemies of the United States, had been watching to see if the Americans would allow that to happen. That account of how things looked in 1964 may not be the final story ; but it is an important enough part of it not to be left out of the row about those documents. After all, it is why Mr Johnson acted as he did.